



# In Search of the Northern Britons in the Early Historic Era (AD 400–1100)

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This is part of the series *Resource Assessment of Local History and Archaeology in West Central Scotland*, commissioned for the Regional Framework for Local History and Archaeology, a partnership project led by Glasgow Museums, with representatives from the councils of East Dunbartonshire, West Dunbartonshire, Glasgow, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire and East Renfrewshire.

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## Introduction

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This paper offers a personal perspective on the key research themes relating to the Northern Britons, who are the most obscure inhabitants of Dark Age Scotland. It includes an overview of the fragmented historical legacy of the Britons, which is essential for appreciating their cultural contribution to the making of Scotland and for identifying research priorities. A detailed review of archaeological investigations in the study area is beyond the scope of this paper, so emphasis is focused on recent work which relates to three broad areas identified for future research: secular settlement, church archaeology and political development.

## Who were the Northern Britons?

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The Britons of Strathclyde were descended from the native Iron Age peoples known as the *Damnoni* (Watson 1926, 15) and occupied the northern end of a continuum of British-speaking peoples which stretched throughout western Britain and as far as Brittany. To the north were their Celtic-speaking cousins the Picts and Gaels. Alone among all the Northern British kingdoms, the kingdom on the Clyde withstood the assault of the incoming Anglo-Saxons and it was the only one to retain its independence in the Early Historic era. However, because the Britons do not figure prominently in the mainstream historical narrative of Scotland and because of the challenges of working with their historical legacy, their contribution has been marginalized. Despite this neglect, the Northern Britons played an important role in the shaping of the west of Scotland and contributed significantly to the social and political developments from post-Roman times to the twelfth century (Driscoll 2002a).

Although it has become conventional to refer to the centuries between the Romans and the Anglo-Normans as the Early Historic era, it is really proto-historic in that the evidence is not sufficient to construct a narrative history. The contemporary historical notices of the Northern Britons are meagre, consisting of terse references to battles and sieges – preserved in external sources only when these events impinged upon their neighbours. We also have incomplete genealogies of kings and obscure literary references which survive in later medieval texts with complex histories of transmission. Consequently it is not possible to construct a coherent narrative until the twelfth century, when new institutions, principally Glasgow Cathedral, began to generate more documents. The challenge of generating such a narrative for the northern Britons can be appreciated in Tim Clarkson's *The Men of the North: The Britons of Southern Scotland* (2010), which provides a comprehensive survey of the historical evidence.

At present there is also insufficient raw material to construct an archaeological narrative, not because of a lack of potential evidence, but because there has been limited excavation and many sites of this period have a low visibility in urbanized west central Scotland. A few major secular sites can be identified, but of these only Dumbarton has been excavated. Lesser sites have been discovered through developer-funded excavations in recent years, but they provide limited insights into the wider social scene. Church archaeology is in a similar situation. A few major ecclesiastical sites can be identified, such as Govan and Paisley, but they have received limited archaeological attention, while the host of minor church sites that can be identified have seen even less archaeological activity. Here we should expect that future discoveries will enhance this picture.

The early medieval sculpture of the British is one bright spot: it is readily accessible and has a proven interpretative value. However, its potential has been scarcely touched upon and it is arguably the most underdeveloped historical resource of the Britons. With few exceptions, such as the Govan sarcophagus, these monuments have not been recorded to modern standards and none have received the sort of detailed attention that has revolutionized Pictish studies (Driscoll et al. 2011). Such work that has been done confirms that these early Christian monuments provide a unique record of artistic development and religious devotion. They embody information about the growth of Christianity, the organization of the ecclesiastical landscape, local political relationships and long-distance connections.

Place names, which can be critical for the identification of individual archaeological sites, represent another undeveloped historical resource. Not only can they act as signposts to ancient specific sites, but through systematic analysis they can reveal the settlement history of the district. The sequence of language change, from British to Gaelic to Scots, embedded in place names contains a record of social and political transformation that is otherwise inaccessible. Coupled with archaeological investigations, such place-name studies represent the main route to constructing a cultural-historical narrative for west central Scotland in the Early Historic era.

## A Heroic Society?

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The earliest surviving native writings in Scotland are by Britons and this provides the first direct indication of what the Britons thought about themselves: a substantial body of praise poetry known as the *Gododdin*, which is preserved in medieval Welsh manuscripts. Although the *Gododdin* provides neither a socially representative portrait – being concerned with the warrior elite – or a historic narrative, the collection nevertheless provides unique insight into a world of small kingdoms, ruled by warlords whose authority was enforced by a personal retinue of aristocratic warriors.

The substantial questions relating to the transmission and historical reliability of the *Gododdin* have been considered recently (Koch 1997), while its position within the wider corpus of Northern British poetry can be assessed in translation (Clancy 1998).

The *Gododdin* collection does not at first appear to be relevant to the west of Scotland because ostensibly it has an eastern focus: the name itself derives from *Votadini*, the Iron Age tribe. The central theme of the *Gododdin* is a celebratory lament for the heroes gathered by the lord of Din Eidyn (Edinburgh) to do battle at Catraeth (identified with Catterick, Yorkshire). However, although the main theatre of action is in the east, prominence is given to the west, notably Dumbarton and the lost kingdom of Aeron (Ayrshire). Koch has argued that this geographical dislocation is because the cycle of poems was transmitted to Wales via Strathclyde (1997, lxxx–lxxxiii).

The *Gododdin* focuses on battle deeds and the heroic qualities of the fallen warriors, most especially the bonds of loyalty, which were cemented through the celebrations in the mead hall. The great hall, of course, was the very place where these poems were subsequently performed, reinforcing the social values of loyalty and heroism.

The following celebration of the lord of Dumbarton's bloody deeds typifies the entire *Gododdin* corpus.

He rose early in the morning,  
When the centurions hasten in the mustering of  
the army  
Following from one advanced position to another.  
At the front of a hundred men he was the first  
to kill.  
As great was his craving for corpses  
As for drinking mead or wine.  
It was with utter hatred that the lord of  
Dumbarton, the laughing fighter,  
Used to kill the enemy.  
(Koch 1997, 13)

The individuals referred to in the collection are likely to have been historical figures, though the majority are not otherwise attested. For instance, another western figure, Cynon, whom Koch has described as 'the single most important hero' in the *Gododdin*, is not historically attested (1997, xli).

A most fitting song for Cynon of the rightful  
privileges:  
He was slain; and before the defensive barrier of  
Aeron was laid waste,  
He reckoned [the deeds of] his gauntlet,  
measuring in grey eagles; [for] in urgency, he  
made food for scavengers.  
For the sake of the subject mounted warriors from  
the mountain country,  
He put his side in front of the spear(s) of enemies.

Before Catraeth there were swift gold-torqued  
men;  
They slew; they cut down those who would stand.  
The whelps of violence were [far] away from their  
[home] regions.  
A great rarity in battle on the side  
Of the Gododdin Britons was any [?]cavalryman  
superior to Cynon.  
(Koch 1997, 23).

Archaeologists, making allowance for poetic licence, have sought to use the poem to enhance their understanding of the contemporary material culture. The main limitation is that while early British poetry, such as the *Gododdin* elegies, captures something of the social world of the warrior aristocracy at the heart of Early Historic political life, it provides a narrow social perspective. For instance, the material culture mentioned – items of dress ('torques'), weapons and drink – is firmly associated with the warrior elite. Putting aside the consideration of the historical details, this poetry reveals the importance of literacy amongst the Britons.

Apart from this poetry evidence of the adoption of literacy is confined to a few short funerary inscriptions, which exhibit a variety of traditions pointing to a widespread knowledge of Latin but regionally distinct writing practices (Forsyth 2005). Although none of these inscriptions fall within the study area, they are an important guide to how literacy was introduced and the most concrete evidence for conversion. The presence of these Christian monuments, thinly scattered from Galloway to remote Pebbleshire and the Lothian heartland, implies that the Clyde had encountered Christianity by the sixth century. This suggestion is supported by the burials at Govan Old Parish Church dating from the fifth to sixth centuries (Owen and Driscoll 2011).

## What happened to the Britons?

When it comes to reconstructing the real political world inhabited by the *Gododdin* and their descendants we are on shakier ground, because the prose legacy of the Britons is more meagre than the poetry. There are few contemporary British sources and most of what is known about political developments must be extracted from English and Gaelic materials (Anderson 1922; Kirby 1962). The uncertainties and gaps in the contemporary record impose severe limitations on the historian and militate against the construction of a coherent narrative. Nevertheless, since the Middle Ages, historians seeking to account for the decline and eventual disappearance of the Northern British kingdoms have fallen back on traditions first articulated by John of Fordun in the fourteenth century (Broun 2004, 130–35). The narrative tradition instigated by Fordun links the sack of Dumbarton by the Dublin Vikings in 870 with the final collapse of British political sovereignty. According



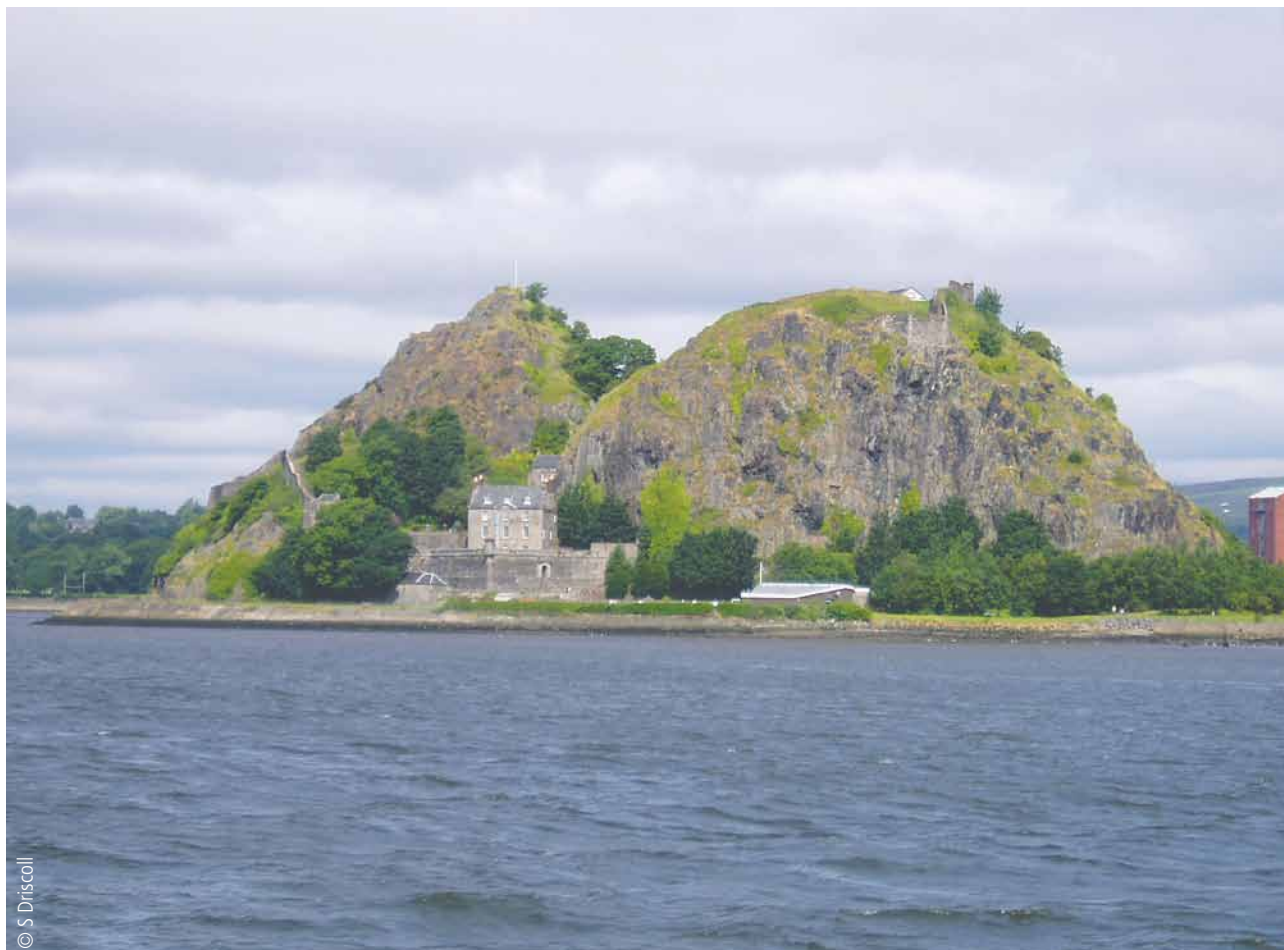
to this view the political vacuum was then filled by the Gaelic kingdom of Alba, which came to dominate the kingdom of Strathclyde by the tenth century. Strathclyde was conceived of as a dependent sub-kingdom ruled by the designated heir of the king of Scots, in a manner suspiciously similar to the later relationship between the monarchs of England and the Princes of Wales.

While there is every reason to accept that 870 marks a major historical watershed, there can be less certainty that the Gaelic kingdom of Alba dominated the Clyde Valley during the Viking Age. Indeed, recent scholarship has refined our understanding of the extent of the pre-Viking kingdom of Dumbarton and of the nature of the Viking Age kingdom of Strathclyde. The arguments for a revision have been drawn together by Dauvit Broun (2004). These challenge the traditional account of a rapid, terminal decline for the Britons and suggest that a British kingdom lasted in Strathclyde until late in the twelfth century. As part of his revision Broun also seeks to separate the replacement of British speech by Gaelic from the development of the kingdom of Alba, in favour of linking the spread of Gaelic in Strathclyde to the influence of the *Gall Gaillib* (meaning 'foreign Gaels', presumably Norse Hebrideans).

A key point to emerge from this recent scholarly work is that the kingdom of Strathclyde, properly speaking, is a product of the post-870 political landscape (Clancy 2006). Prior to this date the kingdom was identified by both Britons and Gaels as 'Clyde Rock' (fig. 1): in Welsh *Al Clud* and Gaelic *Ail Cluaithe*, referring to what is now Dumbarton, 'fort of the Britons'. This distinction between the kingdom of Dumbarton and that of Strathclyde is not simply a terminological nicety, but probably reflects a major political disruption, which was accompanied by a physical shift in the centre of power and a reconfiguration of the ruling elite. The best candidate for the new royal centre on the Clyde is found upstream from Dumbarton at Partick (fig 2.), on the opposite bank from the ancient church of Govan, probably the royal burial place (Driscoll 2003, 2004a).

Over the years uncritical usage of the term 'Strathclyde' led to the supposition that a single kingdom dominated all of west central Scotland from the sixth or seventh centuries: embracing modern Dunbartonshire, Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire and Ayrshire. That this vast area was a single polity in the seventh or eighth centuries now seems implausible. The contemporary references suggest, rather, that the pre-Viking kingdom of Clyde Rock encompassed an area approximating the later counties of Dunbartonshire, possibly also including Renfrewshire (Clancy 2006). Ayrshire was separate and the ancient

Figure 1. *Al Clud* (Dumbarton Rock), from the south side of the Clyde.



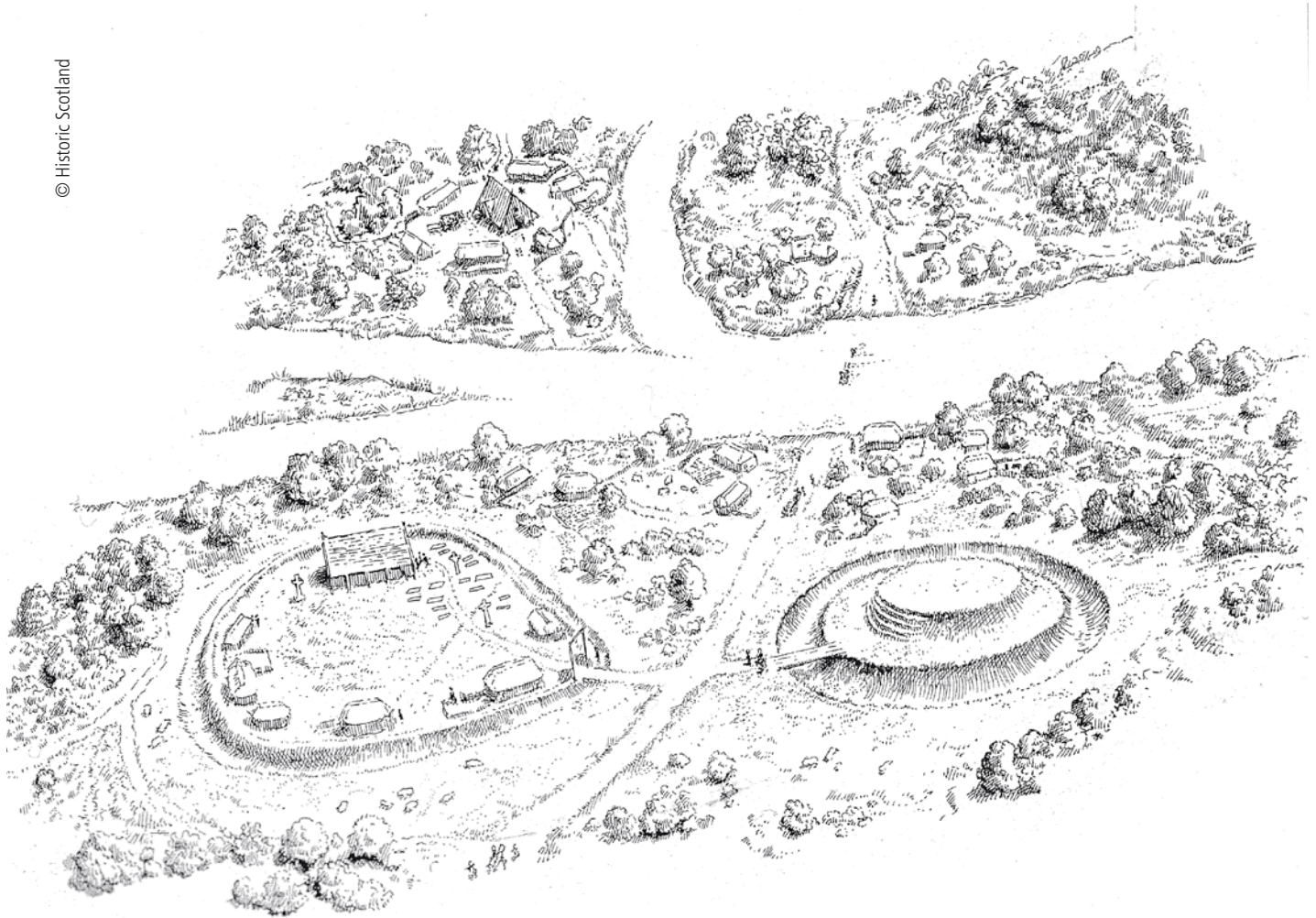


Figure 2. Reconstruction of Govan and Partick by Chris Brown.

historical names of Kyle, Cunningham and Carrick may preserve the names of small kingdoms, while in Lanarkshire, we might imagine that the later royal centres of Cadzow (Hamilton) and Lanark were the centres of small kingdoms or principalities.

While the kingdom of Dumbarton survived until the ninth century, south of the Clyde the expanding Northumbrian kingdom had a corrosive effect on the local British polities. The Northumbrian king Eadberht's conquest of Kyle in 752 appears to have been accompanied by significant English settlement, which is indicated by the Anglo-Saxon place names and ecclesiastical dedications found across the south-west. By the eighth century English was being spoken practically within sight of the Clyde, to judge from the place name Eaglesham and the dedication of Cathcart parish to the Northumbrian royal saint Oswald. English ambition stretched across the Clyde, but was never realized. A victory at Dumbarton by the combined Northumbrian and Pictish armies in 756 was immediately followed by a 'treacherous' attack by the Pictish on the Northumbrians, who never again ventured north of the Clyde (Forsyth 2000). The long-term consequences of the Northumbrian presence in the Strathclyde region are difficult to assess, but it emphasizes that Dumbarton was on the front line in the struggles to maintain British independence, which may account for their interest in the central theme of the *Gododdin*.

Historically the decisive moment for the Britons of Dumbarton came in 870, when the royal stronghold was destroyed by Vikings from Dublin. However, the collapse of *Al Clud* was not the end of the British on the Clyde. The kingdom of Strathclyde which emerged after 870 may have even expanded beyond the bounds of the earlier kingdom, if its influence can be measured by the tenth- and eleventh-century sculpture spread up and down the Clyde (Macquarrie 1990; Craig 1994; Driscoll et al. 2005).

A key point to emerge from Broun's analysis is that Strathclyde, despite the Viking defeat and the Norse influence seen in some of the subsequent sculpture, continued to be ruled by Britons and considered itself British (Broun 2004, 125–30). Moreover, there is no compelling case for regarding Strathclyde as a dependency or puppet of the Gaelic kingdom of Alba at this time. Instead of thinking of the main Gaelic influence coming from the east under the domination of Alba, Broun looks westward to the Irish Sea. In the Viking Age the *Gall Gaellib* were more active on the Clyde coast than is generally appreciated. Although it is not possible to discern their political influence in detail the *Gall Gaellib* did leave their mark in the stratum of Gaelic place names in Ayrshire and Renfrewshire.



By the twelfth century the extent of Strathclyde was approaching the area stretching from the Clyde to Cumbria. This great expansion, although widely recognized, is hard to reconcile with a British kingdom beset by Gaels on the east and west. One possibility is that it benefited from the revival of the kingdom of Northumbria, which enjoyed another period of expansion north and west during the eleventh century and was allied with Strathclyde (Broun 2004, 136–40). The brutal suppression of the Northumbrians in 1070 by William I ended their northern aspirations, and extensive lands fell into the lap of the kings of Strathclyde, so that the last British kings enjoyed dominion over vast territories extending to the Solway and the Tweed. It was only with the growth of the Scottish kingdom in the twelfth century that the British kingdom finally disappeared, and the decisive moment can be identified with the foundation of Glasgow Cathedral in around 1118.

## The Archaeology of Secular Settlements

Turning from the history to the archaeology, the perspective is also dominated by Dumbarton. The exceptional historical and poetic material relating to Dumbarton allowed it to be identified as a royal centre and to attract the attention of archaeologists. Leslie Alcock's pioneering excavations at Dumbarton were intended to interrogate the historical record and explore the material culture of the Northern Britons. Although small in scale, these excavations produced an informative assemblage of finds and identified some of the defences (Alcock and Alcock 1990). The finds include imported pottery, which suggests that Dumbarton occupied a node in a long-distance trade network starting with fifth-century Mediterranean routes (exemplified by B-ware) and shifting in the sixth and seventh centuries to the Continent (E-ware) (Campbell 1996, 2007). Fragments of imported glass drinking vessels are further evidence of this trade, which presumably involved the importation of wine. Evidence of fine metalworking, represented by specialized crucibles, is another signature feature of high-status sites found at Dumbarton.

Prior to the eighth century Dumbarton was the major port on the Clyde, a position it may have occupied since Roman times. Although no Roman material was found by Alcock, the continuation of the Roman road beyond Old Kilpatrick at the western end of the Antonine Wall has long suggested that a port was located at the mouth of the River Leven at Dumbarton. Viking artefacts, including small lead weights and part of a sword – the guard between the handle and the blade – testify to commerce within the Irish Sea zone prior to the siege of 870. After that raid the political focal point for the Clyde seems to have shifted upstream to Partick–Govan, but navigational difficulties presented by the upper Clyde may have meant that the mouth of the Leven retained its commercial importance.

The excavations at Dumbarton recovered limited evidence for the structural development of the site, so Alcock was inclined to look elsewhere in western Britain for comparative evidence (Alcock 1988). Fortunately, a good structural sequence from a major British centre is near to hand at the recently excavated Dundonald Castle in South Ayrshire (Ewart and Pringle 2005). Dundonald occupies the classic position of an Early Historic fortification on a locally prominent hill, but prior to the excavations there was little indication that the occupation sequence extended back into the Iron Age. Like Dumbarton, Dundonald had been subjected to major assault, but it was rebuilt following a series of destructive events beginning in the Viking Age and extending through the Middle Ages. However, in contrast to Dumbarton, Dundonald was examined on a large scale and the settlement sequence was legible. Prior to the construction of the twelfth-century castle, the summit was occupied by round houses, which were replaced by rectangular buildings later destroyed in a conflagration. Unfortunately, the excavations were confined to the extent of the medieval castle ramparts and did not examine the earlier sequence of earthwork ramparts further down the hill slope. The excavations produced a small but important collection of finds, which shows that, although not on the coast, Dundonald's lords obtained imported pottery and glass and patronized fine metalworking comparable with the Dumbarton assemblage. There are no contemporary references to confirm Dundonald's royal status, but the site certainly meets our expectations of an Early Historic royal site with its defences, imported goods and high-status craftworking (Alcock 2003, 179–200).

If Clancy is right and the kings of Dumbarton ruled an area closer in size to Dunbartonshire than the former Strathclyde Regional Council, then there must be a number of centres comparable to *Al Clud* and Dundonald waiting to be discovered. The most obvious place to look is at places which had royal associations in the later Middle Ages, such as Lanark and Cadzow. Both of these are British place names and had royal castles where some official activities took place. However, neither has produced appropriate archaeological evidence to show that this royal activity took place before the eleventh century. Lanark's development as a market town in the later medieval period has obscured its earlier layout. The situation of the castle – hemmed in by a supermarket and covered by a bowling green – typifies the difficulty of getting at earlier horizons. At Cadzow, the opportunities are better. The site of the old castle and settlement survive within the former grounds of Hamilton Palace. Originally the Netherton cross, perhaps of tenth-century date, stood near to the earthwork castle, which survives as a substantial monument despite being adjacent to the M74 motorway.

A second line of inquiry for locating high-status settlements would be to explore sites of later castles,

which as Dundonald shows, may occupy ancient sites. Crookston Castle, despite previous excavation, holds out promise because those excavations were relatively small, its earthworks are massive and geophysical survey has located other structures adjacent to the castle beyond the earthworks (Lewis 2003). Cathcart Castle has a similar potential. Rescue excavations in the 1980s did not reveal Early Historic evidence, but the excavations were limited in scale and the place name indicates an earlier British fortification at the site (B Kerr, personal communication).

A third approach to locating lost British power centres is to consider the estates of the bishops of Glasgow, whose endowment was constructed from the holdings of the former kings of Strathclyde. These sites may be more difficult to locate on the ground than the castles, as is illustrated by the case of Partick, on the opposite side of the Clyde from Govan. Here in the twelfth century the bishops of Glasgow acquired the former Strathclyde royal estate. Until the nineteenth century the site was occupied by a castellated country house, but there are no surface traces visible in the post-industrial wasteland which now covers the site. The bishop's 'palace' recently located at the Bishop's Loch, Easterhouse (Mark Robertson, personal communication), is adjacent to a crannog with earlier origins, suggesting a similarly long history as a centre of power. The ruling elite in Early Historic Scotland displayed a marked preference for defensive residences – hillforts, islands, crannogs – places with fortifications or natural strength, preferably both (Ralston 2004). The best indication of what might be expected from sites of noble, but perhaps not royal, status is to be found at Buiston crannog, Ayrshire, which has been excavated twice. The first excavation, by Munro (1882), provided a wealth of artefacts including Continental and Anglo-Saxon imports and evidence for metalworking as well as poorly understood timber structures. The re-examination by Ann Crone (2000) resolved many of the questions about the structure and expanded the range of artefacts, with finds including ones made from organic materials and a rare bronze bowl. It also provided the most detailed environmental profile for any Early Historic site in western Scotland. The environmental evidence suggests that the site may have been seasonally occupied, serving as a hunting lodge.

Of course, these sorts of sites were in the minority and the majority of the population lived in dwellings so modest and ephemeral that they are almost impossible to identify in the field. There is a shortage of diagnostic low-status artefacts, which makes it difficult to recognize excavated sites of this period. The architectural tradition is also too poorly understood to permit confident interpretation. In recent years three, presumably lower-status settlements, of Early Historic date have been identified by radiocarbon dating. They share no architectural similarities apart from the use of timber: at Dolphinton, Lanarkshire, a sprawling

settlement of sub-oval enclosures and timber buildings evolved between the fifth and tenth centuries (Cook 2002); a well-defined palisade at Titwood in East Renfrewshire was dated to the eighth to tenth centuries – it enclosed the poorly preserved traces of timber buildings and produced five sherds of an undiagnostic earthenware (Johnson et al. 2003); at Kennox, in South Lanarkshire, an enigmatic turf-built structure dating to the fifth to seventh centuries represents a different architectural tradition again (Johnson 2005). The Titwood palisade probably enclosed an arable farmstead. At Dolphinton the economy of the complex open settlement is less clear, but presumably was biased towards livestock. The best occupation evidence relates to the sort of iron working that would be expected in any self-sufficient community at this time. The function of the Kennox building remains unknown. This architectural variation between Upper Clydesdale and East Renfrewshire undoubtedly reflects local environmental conditions and natural resources; it suggests that we will require more excavations before we can generalize about these sites. Given the low visibility of sites such as these, it will probably be through development-funded excavations that further examples will come to light.

## The Archaeology of Christianity

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Early church archaeology is less well-understood than its secular counterpart because, apart from at Whithorn, there has been no major excavation in this area. The coming of Christianity is the most significant social transformation of this period, making it a high priority for future study. Evidence for early Christianity is unevenly distributed across southern Scotland. Clusters of inscriptions in Galloway and Tweeddale indicate a Christian presence by the fifth century (Forsyth 2005), but in our area there are no corresponding monuments. If this absence is real and not the result of post-medieval destruction, it suggests a distinctive conversion process in Clydesdale. Presumably the commercial traffic drawn to the Clyde, the residue of which was recovered at Dumbarton, provided a vehicle for the new religion. Many historical commentators believe that the tyrant Coroticus, chastised by St Patrick for taking Christians into slavery, was the ruler of Dumbarton/*Al Clud*. If this is correct it would imply that a Christian presence was established on the Clyde by the end of the fifth century. There seems little reason to doubt that Christianity was taking root here during the fifth century as it was elsewhere in Britain (Clancy 2001, 10–11; see Taylor 1998 for a review of the critical place name evidence). The historical and linguistic evidence is reinforced by the recent discoveries of early Christian cemeteries on the Clyde at Govan (Driscoll 2004b, 8) and Montfode, Ardrossan (Hatherley, 2009). However, the process of conversions remains obscure: it is impossible to tell whether this was inspired by missionary monks (a construct favoured by earlier commentators), or was imposed by overbearing rulers, or simply emblematic of widespread popular devotion.



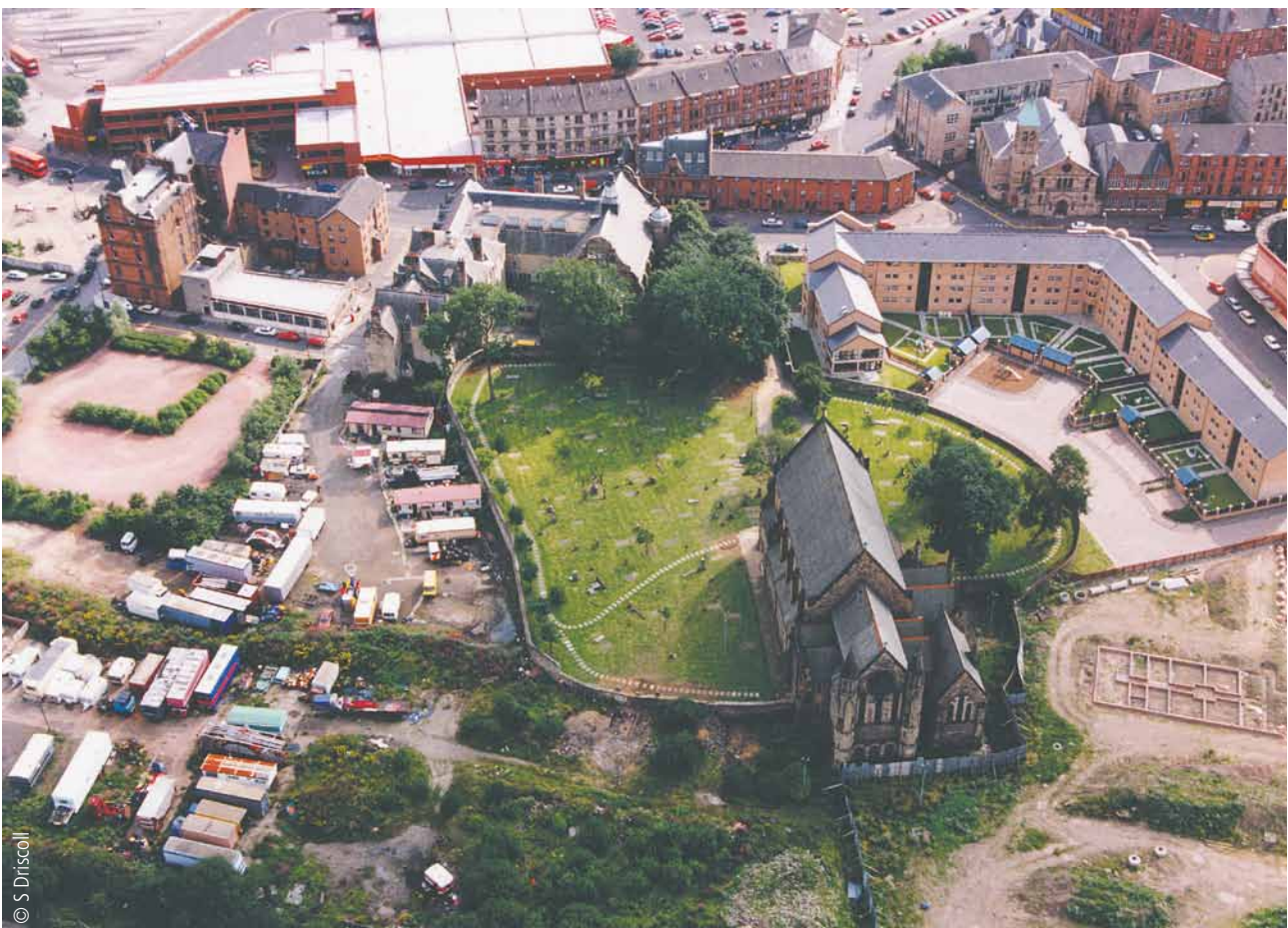
Locating the archaeology of early Christianity is challenging. One traditional approach has been to seek out churches dedicated to early saints. Appealing though it is to link conversion to individual saints, such evidence is historically problematic. Dedications are notoriously difficult to date and may not be a reliable guide to either the date of foundation or the progress of conversion. Even St Kentigern (d. 612), the best documented of the Northern British saints, has a historically dubious biography, because the most complete versions of his life were composed in the twelfth century (Macquarrie 1997, 117–44). These lives draw upon earlier texts, which provide a connection over the intervening five centuries, but this early information is of uncertain reliability. Despite these reservations, associations with early saints are one means of identifying potential early religious foundations. In almost all cases they require further historical, topographic and archaeological investigation to establish their antiquity. Old Kilpatrick church provides an example of a combination of features which are characteristic of an early foundation: the parish is large, its dedication is potentially early, its churchyard is curvilinear in plan, its interior ground level is raised (reflecting a long period of use) and it has tenth-century sculpture. Taken together, Old Kilpatrick appears to have been one of the most important churches on the north side of the Clyde. Another, characteristically enigmatic, example is found at Kilallan, Renfrewshire, where the dedication to St Fillian suggests a date after the introduction of Gaelic,

perhaps in the tenth century, but the simple cross-inscribed stones incorporated into the fabric of the post-medieval church could be earlier. Other features in the vicinity associated with St Fillian – a spring and glacial erratic – hint at the survival of an ancient ecclesiastical landscape. Neither of these sites has been archaeologically examined, so their origins and development remain a matter for speculation.

Despite the doubts about the historical reliability of biographies of the saints, dedications to them can reveal the presence of an active cult at a particular moment in time. This evidence hints at ecclesiastical organization and political coherence in a region. Of particular relevance to understanding the organization of the church in Strathclyde are the dedications to the British St Uinniau, or Finnian, who was active in the mid sixth century and was popular in the south-west: he is commemorated at Inchinnan, Lochwinnoch, Kilwinning, Beith and Dalry (Clancy 2001, 18). The clustering of dedications reveals enthusiasm for the saint, the relics of a cult favoured by a successful dynasty, possibly the fossilized traces of a forgotten principality or petty kingdom.

Most of the potentially early church sites have received relatively little scholarly attention. The exception to this is Govan (fig. 3), where the remarkable collection of

Figure 3. The curvilinear churchyard around Govan Old Parish Church can be seen in this aerial photograph taken during 1994 excavations.





sculpture has been known since the mid nineteenth century. This sculpture inspired excavations in the 1970s and 1990s. To the south-east of the existing church the foundations of a dry-stone structure overlay two burials oriented east–west, which have produced calibrated radiocarbon dates of AD 435–601 and AD 474–601 (Driscoll 2004a, 8). These excavations also revealed the presence of a major boundary ditch and internal bank (a monastic vallum?), calibrated to AD 886–983, and the presence of a road leading east towards a court hill situated beyond Water Row. Too little was exposed to comment in detail on the layout of the site, but the survival of Early Historic deposits inside and outside the churchyard is encouraging for future research.

More recently, an excavation at Midross, a multi-period landscape south of Luss on the south-west shore of Loch Lomond, produced evidence for a circular ditched cemetery, which has provided Viking Age finds and a series of thirty radiocarbon dates spanning the seventh to ninth centuries (MacGregor, forthcoming). These sites make clear that evidence critical for understanding the early Church in Strathclyde awaits discovery through rescue and research excavations.

Although beyond the limits of the study area, it would be impossible to appreciate the growth of Christianity on the Clyde without reference to Bute, where two sites show that by the seventh century Christianity was flourishing. In a secluded glen at the now remote southern tip of the island, buildings of the twelfth century and later overlie a much older ecclesiastical site at Kingarth (Laing et al. 1998). Here substantial sculptural remains (Fisher 2001, 73–77) and a range of artefacts including fine metalworking debris (Anderson 1900) reveal the presence of a major ecclesiastical establishment, which still awaits a substantial modern investigation. The archaeology from Kingarth is complemented by the newly excavated monastery on Inchmarnock off the west coast of Bute. Here there was no monumental sculpture to indicate patronage of early Christian activity, but excavations

and historical research have revealed the presence of a monastery going back to the seventh century (Lowe 2008). A collection of slates has been critical to understanding the significance of the site. It reveals, amongst other things, that students were being taught to write. The subject matter shows that these monks were in contact with Bangor in County Down (Forsyth and Tedeschi 2008). These discoveries underscore the importance of slate as a medium for literate and artistic expression on Clydeside: inscribed slates are a feature of the excavations at Dundonald and Paisley Abbey, showing that the tradition continued throughout the Middle Ages (Ewart and Pringle 2005; Malden 2000).

## Tracing the Norse Influence on the Kingdom of Strathclyde

During the Viking Age the intensity and aggression of Norse warfare caused the demise or transformation of kingdoms across the British Isles. The kingdom of Dumbarton was amongst these. The collapse of the Briton's emblematic stronghold seems to have fatally undermined the kingdom – Dumbarton is absent from the historical record for four centuries – but gauging the Norse contribution to the subsequent kingdom of Strathclyde is more difficult. Contemporary texts are few, making the archaeology central. Although we know very little of what replaced it, there are two strands of evidence which give an indication of the new world order. First is the Hunterston Brooch, found near Stevenson on the Clyde Coast, which is the most accomplished piece of metalwork surviving from Early Historic Scotland. From the perspective of understanding the west of Scotland in the tenth century, the interesting point is on the reverse, where a Gaelic personal name has been roughly incised in Norse runes (Alcock 2003, 321–2). This is graphic proof of the presence of the *Gall Gaellib* on the Clyde. The second strand is a sudden burst of sculptural activity in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Figure 4. One of the hogback stones at Govan Old Parish Church.



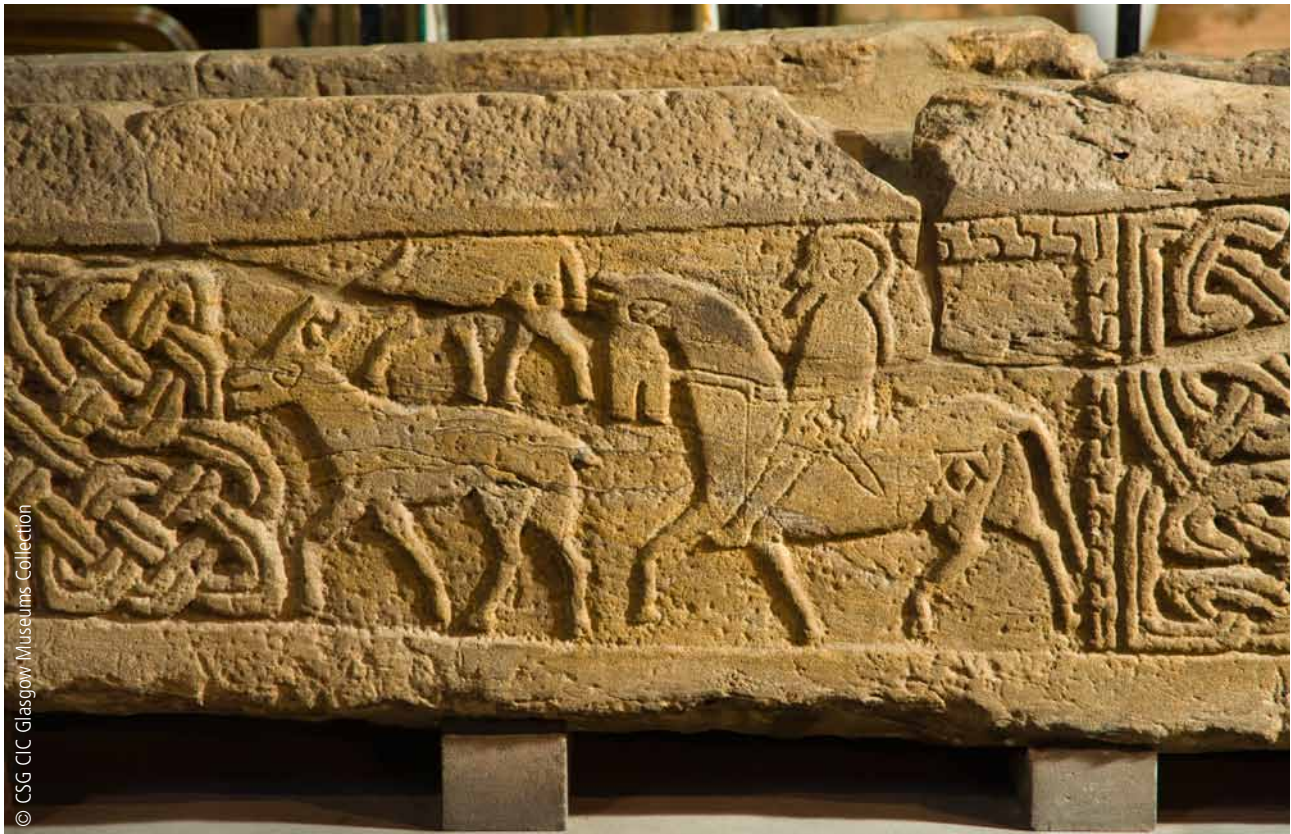


Figure 5 Detail from the sarcophagus at Govan Old Parish Church, perhaps representing St Constantine.

At the heart of any discussion of the Norse role is the remarkable collection of sculpture in Govan Old Parish Church, one of the most distinctive assemblages in Britain (Allen and Anderson 1903; Ritchie 1994). It includes five hogback monuments (fig. 4), massive house- or church-shaped gravestones, which are characteristic of areas of Viking settlement in Yorkshire, Cumbria and southern Scotland. The earliest Govan hogback may date to just before 900; the oldest probably dates into the eleventh century. However, only the hogbacks show this Norse artistic influence. The remainder of the collection exhibits features characteristic of British sculpture that extends to Wales.

The fragmented remains of five free-standing crosses are testament to a highly developed ecclesiastical landscape around the church, which housed Govan's most celebrated sculpture: the monolithic sarcophagus ornamented with a mounted warrior (fig. 5), hunting motifs and interlace panels. The sarcophagus is without close parallel, but was clearly intended to display the remains of a saint, arguably the royal martyr Constantine, son of Kenneth MacAlpine (Davies 2010), and the presence of such a significant piece of church furniture implies the presence of a major church. However, the most common monuments, like the hogbacks and crosses, were intended for the churchyard. The most numerous of the Govan monuments are the 31 recumbent gravestones covered with crosses defined by interlace knotwork. This huge body of sculpture reinforces the impression of a major church, while the proximity to the British royal residence at Partick suggests that it was a royal cemetery.

Across the river at Partick, on the west bank of the Kelvin, stood a royal estate, which came into the hands of the bishop of Glasgow in the twelfth century. What form this royal estate took is an open question, but traces of it may remain. Back on the south side of the Clyde there stood a major monument to royal authority, a large artificial mound known as the Doomster Hill. This stood some 200m east of the churchyard. This mound was built on such a large scale (c. 45m in diameter and 5m high) that it seems it was more than local court hill, perhaps a place of regional assembly where royal justice was delivered and where kings might have been inaugurated.

The evidence from Govan, fragmentary though it is, provides insights into the new British kingdom of Strathclyde which emerged from Dumbarton. The earliest sculpture shows clear Norse influences, but this soon fades. Does this mean that the political influence of the Norse or *Gall Gaillib* also fades? The bulk of the Govan sculpture shares traits with post-Viking Age sculpture found throughout western Britain, which establishes that British cultural links were maintained from Wales through Cumbria and Galloway to Strathclyde. Is this an indication of British social stability too?

Govan is not the only place with Viking Age and later sculpture on the Clyde, but much of what exists shows that it was inspired if not executed by sculptors trained at Govan (Craig 1994; Driscoll et al. 2005). The recumbent grave stones at Dumbarton and Inchinnan



have strong stylistic links with Govan, as well as royal associations, which suggests they might represent burial grounds for cadet branches or close allies of the Strathclyde royal house.

A significant proportion of the Northern British sculpture does not come from churchyards, but appears to have stood on major routeways where the crosses marked significant ecclesiastic boundaries. These include the Mount Blow Cross, which stood on the eastern approach to Old Kilpatrick (Driscoll et al. 2005, 149–51). A more widespread set of crosses arcs across the southern approaches towards Paisley, suggesting that they defined an extensive ecclesiastical zone which is otherwise unattested (Driscoll et al. 2005, 151–6).

This does not account for all early sculpture, which may have been erected at other significant points in the landscape, for instance the Barochan Cross (Driscoll et al. 2005). Moreover, other sculptural traditions are represented at places to the east (Cadzow and Dalserf) and to the west (Lochwinnoch), which testifies to a vigorous enthusiasm for sculpture in the tenth and eleventh centuries. This sculpture may have signified a post-Viking reorganization of the church in Strathclyde.

## The Rise of Glasgow

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One of the main reasons that the Early Historic ecclesiastical landscape is so difficult to read is that the foundation of Glasgow Cathedral in 1114–18 was accompanied by the organization of parishes (Driscoll 2002b). It also marks the end of the independent kingdom of Strathclyde. These transformations have tended to suppress sites of former importance, but it seems safe to say that the churches at Govan and Paisley were among the most influential and suffered as a consequence. St Kentigern's church at Glasgow appears to have been less important, to judge from the absence of sculpture. The excavations within Glasgow Cathedral did produce evidence of a cemetery from the ninth century, but the earliest sculpture known from the site is a round crosshead of Northumbrian design dating to the eleventh century. This crosshead provides a slender hint that Glasgow was emerging as a major ecclesiastical establishment in the middle of the century, under the influence of the revived kingdom of Northumbria with its diocese at York.

It is hard to overestimate the new diocese's success in subsuming the former kingdom of Strathclyde and in developing the cult of Kentigern. During the twelfth century and at the beginning of the next, the cathedral was rebuilt three times (in 1136, 1187 and 1200), on each occasion expanding to accommodate increasing numbers of pilgrims. The rise of Glasgow marks the beginning of the end of the old British order. Not only was the independent British king

replaced by a bishop subservient to the interests of the Scottish Kingdom, and not only was a new ecclesiastic organization established, but the ancient patterns of power depending on kinship and tribute paid in kind were replaced by a newly introduced coin-based economy powered by a new burgh with markets. With the establishment of the cathedral we enter a different historical context and documentary evidence becomes ever more plentiful. As the medieval period progresses it becomes possible to identify non-elite individuals by name, so the sorts of questions archaeologists can ask of the historical record become more nuanced.

## Future Research Themes

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Current research questions asked about the Northern Britons are typical of those which preoccupy early medieval scholars elsewhere. These include questions about the relationship to earlier societies, the influence of Christianity, and the growth of national kingdoms. But the Britons on the Clyde also have a unique legacy as the last surviving Northern British kingdom.

Despite what is known about the linguistic and cultural continuity of the British, links between the Early Historic social and political structures and those of late Iron Age peoples are difficult to establish. Direct archaeological connections are poorly represented, with the recently excavated Dundonald Castle providing the only modern excavated sequence running from the Iron Age to the Early Historic era. It is generally presumed that there was a major dislocation and reorganization around the end of the fourth century, but this is far from certain and may be a feature of the limited archaeological sample and models of social change introduced from southern Britain. To date people have tended to focus on secular sites, but it might be advisable to look more widely.

The coming of Christianity is often considered a catalyst for the wider social transformation of the Early Historic era, however evidence for the conversion process remains scant and substantial questions remain about the contemporary significance of the coming of Christianity. What is often overlooked is that early Christian sites provide one of the richest areas for considering the relationship between the prehistoric pagan past and the new Christian world. The sites with the richest potential to address these questions are rural churchyards which have escaped urban expansion.

Recent work on the situation of sculpture in the landscape demonstrates that sculpture is the key source for investigating the organization of the Viking Age church, while the absence of a modern corpus means that the potential of the complex iconography has not been realized. The creation of an up-to-date corpus must be seen as one of the top priorities for researchers in this area, particularly as this is a dynamic field: as recently as 2009 new finds of 'Govan School' sculpture have been made at Inchinnan and Rutherglen.



The third research theme to be considered here concerns the emergence of post-Roman kingdoms. The most important of these was situated at Dumbarton, but there were other neighbouring kingdoms. It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the development of royal power from the emergence of national identity. It is widely recognized that the early Middle Ages was a time of ethnogenesis, when political structures engendered ethnic self-awareness. In the case of the Northern Britons there are major questions about how this sense of British identity was expressed, how it was modified through the Viking Age and how it influenced the Scottish kingdom during the twelfth century.

At one level this could be examined by investigating more high-status sites, but this may not reveal Norse

influences, given the disruption of the Viking Age. Here, the key may be found in the wider settlement record. In recent years Early Historic British settlement sites have been discovered by chance rather than by design, but systematic place-name analysis would allow the successive waves of settlement – British, Northumbrian, Norse, Gaelic and Anglo-Norman – to be investigated.

None of these strategies will yield quick results and development-funded investigations will continue to make important contributions. The challenges of producing a coherent account of the early Britons in the west of Scotland will require sustained effort to both collect new evidence (as at Buiston and Dundonald) and to contextualize the information generated by development work and chance discoveries.

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### Abbreviations

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*Glasgow Archaeol. J.* = *Glasgow Archaeological Journal*

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